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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 TASHKENT 000717

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TAGS: [PHUM](#) [KIRF](#) [UZ](#)

SUBJECT: UZBEKISTAN'S EVOLVING RESPONSE TO CPC DESIGNATION

REF: A. 06 TASHKENT 2159

[1](#)B. 06 TASHKENT 2307

[1](#)C. TASHKENT 353

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Classified By: AMB. JON R. PURNELL, FOR REASONS 1.4 (B, D)

[1](#)1. (SBU) Summary: Reflecting its disappointment at being designated a Country of Particular Concern (CPC) for religious freedom, last December the government issued a line-by-line rebuttal to the 2006 International Religious Freedom Report. Officials have made limited efforts to engage in dialogue with religious groups, particularly Jehovah's Witnesses, in hopes of lifting the CPC designation.

An extensive media campaign highlighted the country's tolerance and religious diversity, denouncing any criticism as absurd by implication. Recent statements in the official media suggest that Uzbekistan feels it has balanced the CPC designation with a successful public relations effort highlighting its achievements in expanding Islamic religion and culture. Obstacles to a substantive dialogue on religious freedom persist, and additional sanctions would have minimal persuasive effect given the current state of U.S.-Uzbek relations. End summary.

#### DISAPPOINTMENT

[1](#)2. (C) Uzbek authorities expressed initial disappointment at the U.S. decision to designate Uzbekistan a Country of Particular Concern for religious freedom in November 2006. When first informed of the designation, Ismat Fayzullayev, director for U.S. affairs at the Foreign Ministry's Americas Department, suggested that "lack of information" was at the root of the designation, and that we should attempt to resolve disagreements over religious freedom through dialogue rather than economic sanctions (ref A). Some contacts in government privately suggested that the former State Advisor for Religious Affairs, Shoazim Minovarov, lost his job as a result of the designation, as President Karimov had specifically tasked him to improve Uzbekistan's international image.

#### THE WRITTEN RESPONSE

[1](#)3. (U) In December, the government delivered a 62-page rebuttal to the 2006 International Religious Freedom Report which called accusations of limitations on religious freedom "unfounded." The analysis cites Uzbekistan's legislative guarantees of religious freedom, its growing number of

religious groups, and specific examples of government tolerance. It acknowledges systemic restrictions on religious freedom, but characterizes them rather as guarantees of personal liberty and social stability. It justifies the ban on proselytism and missionary activity, saying that "forceful imposition of religious views is unacceptable." It justifies the ban on religious education outside theological seminaries as a guarantee of "the secular quality of the education system." It further maintains that teachers of religion must be properly qualified and certified by state bodies. The rebuttal declares: "Nobody is persecuted for his or her religious beliefs." Those prosecuted for extremism, it states, have been proven guilty of criminal or terrorist activity by "official competent bodies."

¶4. (U) The government's rebuttal justifies strict registration requirements for religious groups as a means "to avoid establishment of numerous sects that advocate for dangerous and hostile doctrines from Satanism to Jihadism." (Note: Here the commentary ignores the fact that the government has the legal right to deny registration to groups that advocate violence. End note.) It explains that certain groups denied registration either had violated the religion law or had not complied with registration guidelines. The ban on all unregistered religious activity, it claims, is normal in any democratic, law-based state. Further, it disputes the Religious Freedom Report's statement that the government controls the content of imams' sermons. Rather, it notes, the themes distributed by the Muslim Board of Uzbekistan to imams for Friday sermons "have a solely consultative character and are of an educational nature."

#### DIALOGUE

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¶5. (C) The government has attempted limited dialogue with

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specific religious groups in an effort to have the CPC designation lifted. In one example, the Associate General Counsel for Jehovah's Witnesses told Poloff that he met with Ambassador Abdulaziz Kamilov in Washington in December to discuss the legal status and treatment of Jehovah's Witnesses in Uzbekistan. He said that Kamilov wanted to know what the Government of Uzbekistan could do to have the Country of Particular Concern designation removed. The Associate General Counsel said that, among other issues, he raised concerns about a government investigation of the Jehovah's Witnesses in the Tashkent Province town of Chirchik, the only remaining registered local congregation, and also requested that the congregations be allowed to carry out the group's principal religious observance, the Memorial of Jesus' Death, on April 2. On both points, according to the Associate General Counsel, Kamilov said that the government would do everything possible to accommodate the group.

#### THE MEDIA CAMPAIGN

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¶6. (U) Almost immediately after the announcement of the CPC designation, the official press began an active campaign in both print and electronic media highlighting Uzbekistan's freedom of religious expression and, usually only by implication, denouncing the CPC decision (ref B). The stream of articles and interviews often included quotes from international experts hailing Uzbekistan's commitment to tolerance and religious diversity. In one example, the national newspaper "Halq Suzi" quoted the Egyptian state news agency as stating that CPC designation amounted to "interference in Uzbekistan's internal affairs." A group of community leaders in the Andijon area wrote an open letter to the Ambassador protesting the CPC designation. Russian Orthodox clerics were quoted in the official press and television thanking the government for the freedom to practice their religion, while at the same time warning of

the dangers of Christian missionary groups. A television report featured an interview with the head of a Jewish Cultural Center who said that "Uzbekistan is the only state in the world where one may enter synagogues without security control."

#### GROWING ACCEPTANCE

17. (U) In January, the Islamic Education, Scientific and Cultural Organization (ISESCO) announced that it had selected Tashkent as the world's Islamic cultural capital for 2007. State media highlighted the decision as international vindication of Uzbekistan's status as a cornerstone of the Islamic world. On March 30, the religious affairs program "Ziyo" on state television highlighted Tashkent's selection as the 2007 Islamic cultural capital and counterbalanced it with the negative effect of CPC designation. The program characterized the ISESCO honor as "an adequate blow to those who are currently accusing Uzbekistan of violating religious freedoms."

18. (C) In recent public statements and meetings, government officials have been unusually silent on the subject of CPC designation. When SCA DAS Evan Feigenbaum met on March 1 with Bakhrom Abdukhalimov, the State Advisor on Religious Affairs (ref C), Abdukhalimov did not contest the issue. Instead, he simply asserted Uzbekistan's religious diversity, its importance in Islamic cultural history, and the government's efforts to ensure peaceful relations among religious groups.

#### COMMENT: DOES UZBEKISTAN CARE?

19. (C) The government seems to have accepted Uzbekistan's designation as a Country of Particular Concern. The government characterizes the designation as a purely political gesture tied to the perceived U.S.-led effort to discredit Uzbekistan in world opinion. It seems to regard the designation primarily as a blow to the country's pride. The U.S.-Uzbek relationship is already so severely restricted that any additional sanctions resulting from CPC designation would have little tangible effect. The government is firmly entrenched in the conviction that its restrictions on religious activity are reasonable and consistent with its international human rights commitments.

PURNELL